
H-France Review Vol. 17 (September 2017), No. 171

Susan Allen, *René Maran's Batouala Jazz-Text*. Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2015. xli + 343 pp. \$109.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-03431564-7.

Review by Brett A. Berliner, Morgan State University.

In 1921, René Maran (1887-1960), a black man born in Martinique, was a largely unknown colonial official, stationed in the Ubangi-Shari, French Equatorial Africa. Years before, as a child in boarding school in Bordeaux, then a young man at Lycée Michel de Montaigne, Maran developed a love for language and literature, which he put to good use in the French colony. Indeed, he studied local languages and peoples and over the course of a number of years wrote a novel, *Batouala, véritable roman nègre* (1921). This novel, Maran's first, did not initially generate much renown, but it was noticed by *les Dix*, the judges of the Prix Goncourt, who awarded Maran their prestigious prize on 14 December 1921.

Recognition as a Prix Goncourt laureate, the first black man to win this honor, did not, however, earn Maran much praise. Rather, he was soon subject to blistering attacks, less for his novel than for his preface to the novel, a strident attack on French colonial abuses. Praise and condemnation from both blacks and whites would trail Maran for the rest of his long and prolific career as an engaged intellectual, novelist, poet, and journalist. Despite a number of studies devoted to Maran, there has not been a full-scale reappraisal of *Batouala* in English in recent years. [1] Susan Allen's new, intriguing, and problematic *René Maran's Batouala Jazz-Text* is, thus, much welcomed.

Allen's work, based on her dissertation at the University of Newcastle, Australia, is, at first blush, an interdisciplinary study of the structure or form of *Batouala*. Asserting that, hitherto, Maran and *Batouala* have been misunderstood because of binary thinking, Allen claims a rather expansive goal for her work: "to extricate the novel from the current constraints of colonial and post-colonial thinking and stimulate discussion of the work as a jazz-text expression of African ontology" (p. xii). As a jazz-text, Maran's *Batouala* challenges, argues Allen, if not overcomes, the Western divide between both music and literature and, socio-culturally, the civilized and the savage.

In the first section of the book, comprising three chapters, Allen examines the European context and reception of *Batouala*, synthesizing previously well-examined primary and secondary sources to argue that Europeans thought in fixed, dichotomous categories. Such binary thinking, Allen argues, infected critics who largely divorced Maran's incendiary preface from his novel proper. Indeed, the preface was jarring: "Civilisation, civilisation," cries Maran, "orgueil des Européens, et leur charnier d'innocents.... Tu bâtis ton royaume sur des cadavres. Quoi que tu veuilles, quoi que tu fasses, tu te meus dans le mensonge..." (p. 292). Maran's active, emotive voice attacking colonial atrocities was, not surprisingly, met with critical disapprobation, but more surprisingly, Allen notes, it led critics to subordinate, if not entirely overlook the importance and originality of the novel and the novel's relationship to its preface. This critical trend, Allen further claims, has largely persisted to today.

It is in the second section of the book, which comprises six chapters, that Allen makes her fresh contribution to Maran studies, analyzing the entirety of the work as a jazz-text. The novel's plot, most superficially about love and jealousy and the demise of Batouala, a Banda chief under colonial rule, is not Allen's concern. Rather, it is how that story was told and the implications of reading Maran's work as a jazz-text. As such, Maran's work obliterates what she terms is the "sterile dichotomy of *récit* and *musique*" (p. 117) to express the interchangeability of speech and music, something she claims is characteristically African. In addition, as a jazz-text, one of the underlining structures of the work is a "call-and-response template" (p. 113). This template not only can be perceived through narrative elements in the novel, but also, Allen asserts, unites the preface to the novel. There are, Allen suggests, other musical structures in the novel, such as narrative elements that follow the "pattern of three-over-two beats" (p. 241) and elements drawn from African rhythms, and Allen claims the novel embeds a range of sensory elements, such as olfactory, which expresses, she further claims, the African psyche. The jazz-text also erases linear time in favor of circular time, an element of jazz and, Allen declares, African ontology. And finally, Allen notes that Maran, who claimed his novel was largely an objective record or etching of what he witnessed in Africa, effectively silenced his own voice in the novel. This, Allen argues, opens the reader to what is beyond words, a sensory experience, again, part of the experience of a jazz performance.

The implication of a jazz-text reading of *Batouala* is, Allen announces, nothing less than an obliteration of dichotomous thinking, especially the civilized-savage binary, which Allen believes is the basis of European identity (p. 34). Moreover, a jazz-text reading allows for the expression of the African voice and African ontology in the novel.

Despite the originality of her approach to reading and analyzing Maran's *Batouala*, Allen's bold assertions are not easily convincing. First, reading *Batouala* as a jazz-text is problematic. Jazz was only in its infancy in the United States, and not yet present in France or Africa, when Maran wrote the novel; there is no evidence that he was exposed to jazz until the mid 1920s, long after he wrote the work. Still, jazz could have influenced his extensively revised, definitive edition of *Batouala*, published in 1938, but Allen does not provide evidence for significant changes in the novel. Furthermore, it was the 1921 edition of *Batouala* that was of greatest cultural resonance in France. Second, Allen makes claims that consider Africa as a unity, discussing "African music," "African ontology," or "African philosophy." Maran knew the Ubangi-Shari region, not all of Africa, and Allen negates the incredible diversity of peoples, cultures, and thought on the African continent as she generalizes to make her argument. Her generalizations also extend to such constructs as "Europeans" and "Western thought." Finally, this work, over-reliant on a rather limited range of sources, makes claims about jazz, African influences on jazz, and the musicality of Maran's novel that are simply hard to accept, especially because of their lack of nuance. Despite the problematic nature of this study, Allen wonderfully challenges our reading of Maran and, more, reminds us that René Maran was a thinker whose ideas and writings deserve continued attention.

NOTE

[1] See Keith Cameron, *René Maran* (Boston: Twayne, 1985); John Alfred Dennis, "The René Maran Story: The Life and Times of a Black Frenchman, Colonial Administrator, Novelist and Social Critic; 1887-1960" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1986); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Femi Ojo-Ade, *René Maran, The Black Frenchman: A Bio-Critical Study* (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1984).

Brett A. Berliner
Morgan State University
Brett.Berliner@morgan.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172